



Words & pictures  
by Dave Hurrell

**R**ecent sweeping changes in the way that the Swift Group designs and builds its motorhomes have resulted in a range of products that are much improved. Thickly clad alloy flanks hide a motorhome structure that uses less wood, while exterior looks are now some of the best in the business.

Swift brand Bessacarr's E700 series represents the pinnacle of the company's motorhome ranges, offering its most luxurious accommodation with high levels of equipment as standard.

As the icing on the cake of this brave new world of motorhomes, Swift recently launched its first tag-axle model for many years in the shape of the E769 (and almost identical Kon-Tiki 669). In line with current motorhome fashion, this model features an easy-to-access 'island' double bed in its own bedroom at the rear.

And so we come to the subject of this test, the spanking new E789, a 'van that's very similar to its stable mate, but with one crucial difference that'll earn it a very different audience.

This model swaps island bed for a garage, which offers the huge storage space that the E769 cannot. There's still a permanent double bed in its own 'bedroom' at the rear, but here its set transversely and at high level, above that all-important garage.

### GRAND TOURER

This big Bessie looked reasonably magnificent pitched at the Camping and Caravanning Club's superb Barnard Castle site, drawing more than a few admiring glances. At more than eight-



*Pitched at the Camping and Caravanning Club's lovely Barnard Castle site*

### AT A GLANCE

■ **PRICE FROM:** £58,495 OTR

■ **BERTHS:** 4/5

■ **BASE VEHICLE:** 3.0-litre Fiat Ducato Al-Ko chassis cab

■ **LAYOUT:** Swivelling cab seats and overcab double bed ahead of twin-sofa lounge with two forward-facing travel seats, nearside kitchen, offside fridge and washroom, nearside wardrobe, offside wardrobe and vanity unit, transverse double bed above garage

■ **ECONOMY:** 17.5mpg overall

# BIG QUEEN BESSIE

*Big accommodation and bags of style give this luxury Bessacarr comfort and campsite cred aplenty*





## On Test Bessacarr E789 on 3.0-litre 160 Multijet Fiat Ducato



and-a-half metres (28ft 5in) long and wearing six stylish alloy wheels, this 'van will give any owner more than a little campsite cred.

An Al-Ko replacement rear chassis provides the underpinnings for the twin rear axles and big body, also allowing the installation of a partial double floor.

Step aboard and you discover a layout that takes full advantage of a big interior space, with a palatial lounge ahead of centre kitchen and washroom. In the rear is the permanent, over-garage double bed – well served by twin wardrobes and a vanity unit.

In contrast to the Bessacarrs of recent times, which sported dark gentleman's club-style interiors, the new breed shows a far more modern face. Light-coloured, silver-trimmed furniture is enhanced by brown carpet and curtains. The soft furnishings are part-trimmed in rope motif material, while brown half-leather completes the scene, giving a nod towards an old-fashioned idea of luxury.

### FIAT'S FINEST

As it's undeniably bulky, and with a five-tonne chassis to haul along, this 'van demands plenty of power. Thankfully, it's furnished with the latest Fiat Ducato's 160 Multijet, 157bhp motor as standard. The Al-Ko chassis replaces the standard rigid axle rear suspension with independent springing courtesy of torsion bars and the whole set-up sports six disc brakes for efficient stopping.

Entry to the cab is made easy with remote central locking – an extra button on the ignition key's chunky handle operating the caravan door's lock. Unfortunately, this system proved to be somewhat erratic during the test: eventually it failed completely.

Once aboard the driving department, you discover an indecently high level of equipment, although the omission of a

passenger airbag seems a bit mean in a high status 'van like this. Unfortunately, there's not one on the options list either.

Electric windows and mirrors, ABS and trip computer are all expected to be in place and indeed they're all present and correct. Cab air-conditioning is a useful and welcome feature too.

The drop-down LCD monitor that used to provide a picture from the standard-fit reversing camera has (for 2008) been replaced by a bracket-mounted satellite navigation system whose screen also displays the camera's image. Unfortunately, the satnav unit was missing from the test 'van, so I was unable to test either it, or the reversing camera. This was a shame because as there's no internal through-vision, a reversing camera is an important accessory.

The Bessacarr-trimmed seats feature the same half-leather as the living area. They're height-adjustable and very comfy – even long journeys should produce few aches and pains. Storage is good too, with deep door pockets and the much-crowded-about 'laptop' locker – which is more likely to end up stuffed with maps and site guides.

Above, the overcab bed's base glides upwards on gas struts, making entry and exit from the cockpit easy. Thankfully, Bessacarr fits a non-standard radio/CD player that'll also read discs burned with MP3 files. Armed with your computer and your favourite CDs you can copy, convert and burn around 150 songs onto a single CD. This seems a great idea – when I've worked out how to do it I'll let you now how well it works! Old hands will be pleased to discover – oh joy-of-joys – that this stereo doesn't switch itself off after half an hour. It also powers four living area speakers – two in the lounge and two at the foot of the bed. All it lacked was a remote control – I had

to sprint to the cab first thing in order to get my Wogan fix cranked up.

Aside from that nice brown carpet on the floor, the Bessie cab is finished off with some plastic wood dash trim. Unlike the walnut-style stuff normally found, this light-and-lovely version sports Bessacarr nomenclature and actually looked pretty smart.

### TAG TAKES OFF

Thanks to Fiat's 160 Multijet motor, the E789 wants for nothing in the power department. Even the considerable bulk of this 'van presents no problems for the Ducato's range-topping engine. Although a four-cylinder unit, it's smooth and quiet when cruising, if producing a slightly harsh and aggressive growl when pushed.





## I LIKED

- Stylish good looks
- Powerful engine
- Six-speed gearbox
- Comfy cab
- Modern interior decor
- Big lounge
- Full cooker
- Plenty of worktop
- Classic, capable washroom
- High quality mattresses
- Large, twin-doored garage

## I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- An additional light in the overcab bed
- High-level ventilation in the washroom

## I DISLIKED

- Truma heater located in the kitchen
- Poor presentation of test vehicle

**1** Forward view shows centre kitchen - with washroom opposite - leading to the lounge

**2** Light, modern decor and comprehensive lighting makes for a good-looking interior

**3** The E789's Ducato cab is very well equipped in standard form

**4** Two belted rear travel seats

**5** The big lounge is one of the best

The six-speed box offers well-judged ratios and top gear is best used at speeds over 60mph. Even on A-roads this 'van can be pushed along indecently quickly, while on motorways 70mph is easy to reach and maintain. Although the engine is Euro 4 emissions compliant and quoted by Fiat as being 'umpteen' per cent more economical than predecessors, when propelling this large 'van it becomes a bit of a heavy drinker. The trip computer told tales of 17-18mpg throughout the test, even when I adopted feather-foot driving techniques. That said, the engine was a still-tight unit and economy may well improve. I'd hope to get fuel consumption figures in the low 20s once things have loosened up: think 10,000 miles.

The latest Ducato is very easy and 'car-

like' to drive, its light, variable ratio steering being particularly easy to use. Gearchange - while not as good as Ford's Transit or VW's T5 - is good too. Although there are six discs providing ABS-equipped stopping power, I found that a very firm push on the brake pedal was needed to bring this biggest Bessie to a quick halt. Again, bedding in of the brand-new discs and pads should improve this.

The handbrake also left a little to be desired, but I've found that this tends to be a feature of many Al-Ko chassis-equipped 'vans I've tested.

As a four-berth 'van, the E789 achieves best-standard status by offering a total of four travel seats. The L-shaped lounge gives a forward-facing sofa section with two three-point belts - removing a section of the side settee allows the right-hand belted seat to

be used. Finally, do bear in mind that if you passed your car driving test after 1996 you will not be licensed to drive this five-tonne 'van without taking a further test.

## LUXURY LIVING

Thanks to the wide Ducato cab, the seats swivel easily to face a lounge that's difficult to fault. Sofas face each other, both offering feet-up lounging. Very sociable, this area will welcome up to eight people and with just me on board it felt positively palatial.

The atmosphere in here is very nice too: the light-hued furniture and neutral colours may be unadventurous, but they are relaxing and easy to live with. At the lounge's forward end, a discreet wall-mounted bracket is designed to take the standard-fit flat screen



3



4



5



TV. Above, a wind-up Midi Heki rooflight works with the large side window to let in plenty of natural light - the Heki providing good ventilation in hot weather.

Mealtimes should see a freestanding table set up in the lounge, but unfortunately the test vehicle was presented without a table. As far as I could see, the table will stow in a slot in one of the two rear-located wardrobes. Previous experience suggests that it should offer reasonable dining for a full complement of four people. In the meantime, I made do with a tray kidnapped from home as a dining surface.

Is this good lounge? Yes, its one of the best and will very probably be one of the main reasons to buy this motorhome.

electronic ignition and the stove's performance (aside from a rather slow grill) was as good as its looks. Above, three cupboards and single-speed cooker hood sit next to a standard-fit microwave oven. A useful item, it's nonetheless set high and great care will be needed when using it.

The sink is a circular unit with no fixed drainer and I expected to find a removable version in the slot provided in one of the cupboards. However, no drainer was present in the test vehicle, so I was unable to try it out.

Opposite the main kitchen area is Thetford's biggest fridge. This 180-litre monster is a single-door affair, eschewing a separate freezer for wine storage shelves in its

top. Although I hoped to discover champagne or chablis lurking there I was disappointed, bribery and corruption has yet to cloud this reporter's objectivity. Luckily, I always carry an emergency crate of brown ale! Seriously though, there's plenty of room for lots of fresh food in this big fridge and if you enjoy a nicely chilled glass of white, the dedicated bottle shelves make a lot of sense.

The main kitchen unit's base features a couple of slim cupboards and a reasonable cutlery drawer, but the biggest cupboard houses the Truma heating unit. There must, I suppose, be a good reason for it being located here, but it's the most annoying thing about this kitchen, as a big chunk of storage space is lost.

## FULL-FAT COOKING

The kitchen sits amidships, just aft of the caravan door, and the first thing that strikes you is the generous amount of working surface on offer. At either end of the base unit there's plenty of room for food preparation and even enthusiastic cooks should be happy working here. Next in the queue of tasty treats offered here is a full-sized cooker. This has three gas burners, an electric hotplate, a grill and oven. All the flames benefit from

**6** Galley is well-equipped and offers plenty of worktop

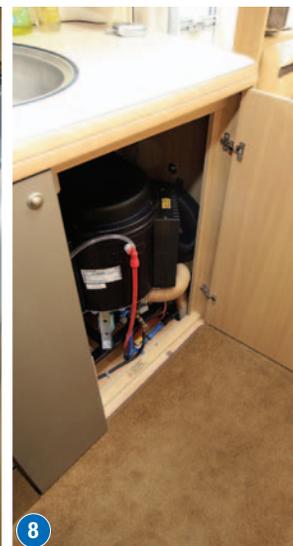
**7** Thetford's finest cooler graces the kitchen

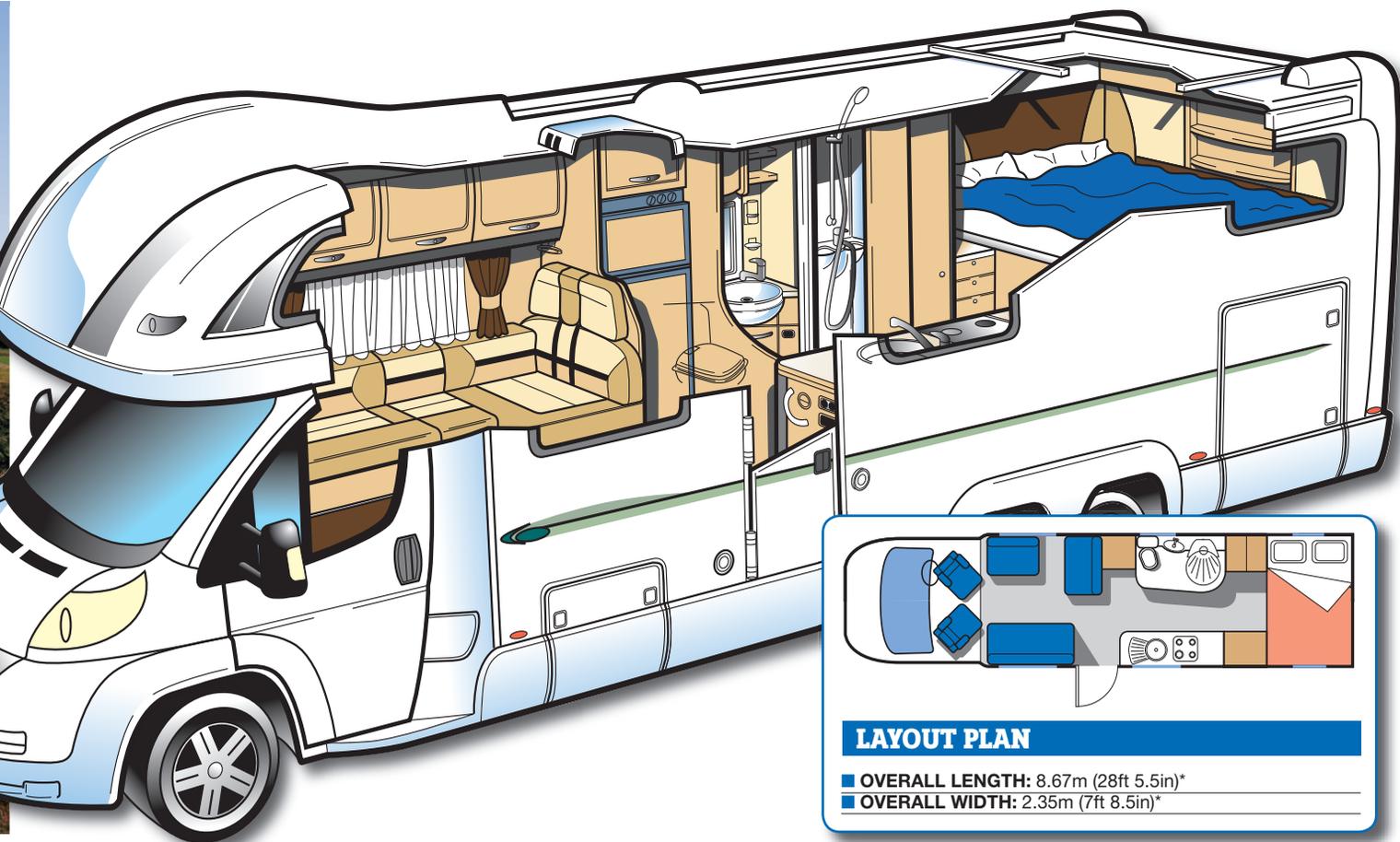
**8** Sadly, the Truma heater lurks in the kitchen's biggest cupboard

**9** Rear double bed is superb

**10** The overcab berth is very good, and a single bed can also be made from the offside sofa

**11** Classic Swift Group washroom proved capable





**FAMILIAR FRESHENING UP**

To anyone familiar with Swift Group products, walking into the E789's washroom will be like coming home. Presumably using the adage 'if it ain't broke don't fix it', this bathing space retains the design and equipment of previous models, albeit with the light, modern styling of the rest of the 'van.

A decent vanity basin with enough counter top, storage above and below and enough space to use the swivel-bowl loo (which has a separate flush water tank) in comfort, all conspire to help make a good washroom. The drum-shaped separate shower is an old friend too and works well, as long as you're not too large of frame.

An obscured window, good lighting and a domestic-style door with lock add appeal, while loo roll holder, toothbrush dock, soap dish and towel ring leave this canny wee room ready to move into.

**BESSIE'S BEDS**

Swift's recently introduced overcab design is a giant leap forward and serves to produce one of the best-looking units on the market. This is true from outside, and inside as the luton bed area benefits from a moulded, velour-lined interior that displays both style and quality. As previously described, the bed base rises on gas struts, then a zip in the cloth trim panel below opens to reveal a neatly-stored access ladder.

Extract the ladder, lower the bed base and it's ready for use. The nicely made alloy ladder makes it easy to gain access to the bed, which features a comfortable mattress on a sprung-slat base. All this space really lacks is lighting at both ends - the vertical fluorescent lamp on the offside did seem a bit mean. Although officially a four-berth, it's easily possible to make a single bed from the offside sofa by simply removing its backrests. This bed is not too long, but it means that with two kids present, you could sleep one up and one down if needed and without getting in the way of the luton's access ladder.

The over-garage double bed is almost domestic sized and very well served. Again,



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a good mattress rides on a slatted base and proved to be very comfortable indeed. There's a vanity unit next to the bed's head, which also makes a good bedside cabinet. Bessacarr has resisted the temptation to place windows at both ends of this bed, so the (offside) head end benefits from a nicely padded wall to rest your napper on. With speakers at the foot, reading lights, a Heki rooflight above and a shelf across the rear, this slumbering space is one of the best of the type I've encountered. Only the slightly tricky access steps compromise this a touch. Do also bear in mind that you'll need to be reasonably agile to use this bed with confidence.

### SWIFTLY STORED

The garage is arguably this 'van's most important storage space. This is, in part, due to the fact that secondary transport will be - if not essential - a very desirable accessory to have. The E789 is an undeniably large motorhome and parking away from campsites could be

a problem. This is where another set (or sets) of wheels will come in handy for shopping or exploring. Fit motorhomers may choose bikes, but everyone will be pleased to discover that the garage has a 200kg payload and plenty of space to accommodate a scooter or a couple of mopeds. There's plenty of space for lots of lightweight items too, while twin access doors make things easier to get at.

Upfront, this 'van's semi double floor (the cavity extends only forward of the rear axles) provides storage for slim items (via an external access door) that also extends into the base of the offside sofa. Inside, there's space under the nearside sofa and forward-facing seat too. Overhead lockers, lockers above and below the fridge, vanity unit with drawers and twin wardrobes aft complete storage provision that offers lots of space and plenty of spaces. Thankfully, an over 800kg payload should mean you can fill the spaces with confidence

### KIT BAGGED

Thanks to the aforementioned semi double floor, the 125-litre fresh water tank is safely enclosed in a warmed, frost-free space, making all-year motorcaravanning possible. The heating system too, is ultimately flexible as Truma's Combi EH unit warms the interior and water using gas or mains electricity. The control panel is mounted above the good-looking caravan door (with window and gas strut stay) and displays and controls everything - even including a heating programmer and wake-up alarm.

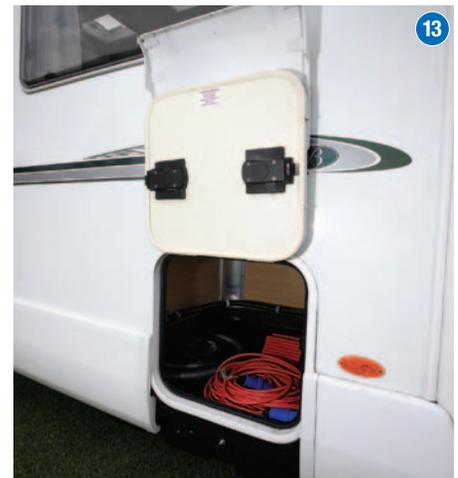
Good and comprehensive lighting and top quality pleated blinds reinforce the interior's upmarket feel, while cab blinds leave the space here uncluttered at night. A directional TV aerial is standard and a flat screen TV,

designed to fit on the bracket in the lounge or one at the foot of the bed, comes as part of the standard Elegance Pack of accessories that includes the satnav and flush fitting rollout awning. (A TV was supplied with the test 'van, but it proved to lack the all-important fitting to mate with the wall brackets.)

The E789 is well endowed with high-level ventilation - in addition to Midi Hekis front and rear, there's a Mini Heki amidships above the kitchen. However, no high-level ventilation is fitted in the washroom and I'd like to see a second Mini Heki fitted here.

### BEST BESSIE

The Bessacarr E789 is one of the most handsome big coachbuilt motorhomes on the UK market. Its campsite presence is difficult to ignore and pride of ownership is pretty much a



forgone conclusion.

On the road, the cab is more than comfortable enough to make long journeys a pleasure, while the 160 Multijet motor propels very convincingly, if at the expense of ultimate fuel economy.

Once pitched, this 'van works very well indeed, with palatial lounge, good kitchen capable washroom and comfy beds all doing their bit. Four people on board should have plenty of space to live in comfort and the stylish, modern interior should make them feel good, even on the darkest of days.

Big payload and lots of storage space make for a capable long-distance or long-term tourer, as secondary transport and all your kit can easily be carried.

Equipment levels in standard form are also high: standout items include mains/ electric heating, and a decent stereo with four speakers in the living area. The Elegance pack

ensures your shopping list for retrofit kit can be reduced to almost nothing.

You may, at this point, get the impression that I liked this motorhome and you would be right. I could find little to criticise, with only the presence of the Truma heater in the kitchen's biggest cupboard making me gently grind my teeth. I would, however, add to leisure battery capacity, as I feel that 110 amp hours will be found wanting when spending time away from campsite hook-up. I'd also consider having (if possible) a Mini Heki or similar roof vent fitted in the washroom. Without it, things will probably get too steamy in there come shower time.

So is the E789 worth a look? Well, it's not the cheapest of the type, Burstner's equally big A747 is several grand cheaper for instance, but it is sensibly priced, especially considering the high level of standard kit. If you do buy one, be aware that you may find yourself giving guided tours on a regular basis! ■

## WE STAYED AT

**Barnard Castle Camping and Caravan Club Site**, Dockenflatts Lane, Lartington, County Durham DL12 9DG  
(tel: 01833 630228; web site: [www.campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk](http://www.campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk))

## VEHICLE SUPPLIED BY

**Swift Group**, Dunswell Road, Cottingham, East Yorkshire, HU16 4JX  
(tel: 01482 847332; web site: [www.swiftleisure.co.uk](http://www.swiftleisure.co.uk))

- 12 Garage is roomy and offers a door at each side
- 13 Front end storage space extends into the double floor

## LIVE-IN TEST DATA

### TYPE

- Overcab coachbuilt

### PRICE

- From: £58,495 OTR
- As tested: £58,495 OTR

### BASICS

- Vehicle: Fiat Ducato Al-Ko chassis cab
- Berths: 4/5
- Three-point belted seats: 4 (including driver)
- Warranty: 3 years base vehicle and conversion,

### CONSTRUCTION

Alloy clad sandwich construction, one-piece GFRP roof, GFRP overcab and rear panels, alloy skirts

### DIMENSIONS (\*manufacturer's figures)

- Length: 8.67m (28ft 5.5in)\*
- Width: 2.35m (7ft 8.5in)\*
- Height: 3.05m (10ft 0in)\*
- Wheelbase: 5.00m (16ft 5in)
- Rear overhang: 2.65m (8ft 8.5in)
- Max authorised weight: 5000kg\*
- Payload: 835kg (after 75kg allowance for driver, plus 90 per cent fuel, gas, fresh water)\*

### INSIDE STORY

Swivelling cab seats and overcab double bed ahead of twin-sofa lounge with two forward-facing travel seats, nearside kitchen, offside fridge and washroom, nearside wardrobe, offside wardrobe and vanity unit, transverse double bed above garage

- Insulation: Floor 44mm, walls 32mm, roof 34 mm
- Interior height: 1.97m (6ft 5.5in)

### THE VEHICLE

- Engine: 3.0-litre turbo-diesel producing 115kW (157bhp) @ 3500rpm
- Transmission: Six-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- Fuel consumption: 17.5mpg overall
- Brakes: Discs all round
- Suspension: Independent all round. Front: coil springs, Rear: torsion bars
- Features: Remote central-locking to cab and caravan door, electric windows and mirrors, driver's airbag, ABS, Blaupunkt Madrid radio/CD/MP3 player, living area on-road heating, trip computer, air-conditioning, variable wiper delay, satellite navigation, rear view camera, 12V socket, 'laptop'

compartment, twin door bins, height-adjustable seats, cab carpet

### LOUNGING & DINING

Swivelling cab seats, offside L-shaped and nearside longitudinal sofas, freestanding table stows in wardrobe and erects to provide dining facilities from lounge seating

### KITCHEN

Nearside-located main unit provides two overhead cupboards, two low-level cupboards, one with pull-out baskets, cutlery drawer, work surface extends to left of cooker and right of sink, offside-located fridge has lockers above and below

- Sink: Circular stainless steel unit has removable drainer and inset cutting board, single-lever mixer tap
- Cooker: Stoves Newhome slot-in with three gas burners, one mains electric hotplate, grill, oven, all with electric ignition. Single-speed extractor above
- Fridge: Thetford N180 with Smart Energy Selection. Capacity 180 litres

### WASHROOM

Oval vanity basin, single-lever mixer tap, cupboards above and below, soap dish, toothbrush 'glass,' soap dish, towel ring, toilet roll holder, Thetford electric-flush swivel-bowl toilet with built-in flush water tank. Separate circular shower unit with rigid screen, single-outlet tray, wooden duckboard, semi-seat, riser rail-mounted showerhead, mixer tap, two shelves

### BEDS

- Overcab double
  - Length: 1.90m (6ft 3in)
  - Width: 1.34m (4ft 4.5in)
  - Headroom: 572mm (1ft 10.5in)
- Lounge single
  - Length: 1.80m (5ft 11in)
  - Width: 650mm (2ft 1.5in)
- Rear double
  - Length: 1.97m (6ft 5.5in)
  - Width: 1.30m (4ft 3in)
  - Headroom: 740mm (2ft 5in)

### STORAGE

- Lounge: Five overhead lockers, top-accessed space under nearside and forward-facing section of offside sofa, top and externally accessed space under offside sofa extends into double floor cavity.
- Rear bedroom: Single-door wardrobe with

side-to-side hanging rail and three pullout wire baskets in base, two-door wardrobe with side-to-side hanging rail and upper shelf, vanity unit with three drawers and single-door cupboard, two shelves to rear of bed.

- Garage: Rear located, with a door either side and rail-mounted tie-down eyes

### LIFE SUPPORT

- Fresh water: Capacity 125 litres (27.5 gallons)
- Waste water: Capacity 100 litres (22 gallons)
- Water heater: Truma Combi EH boiler, gas-mains operation
- Space heater: Truma Combi EH with blown-air, gas-mains operation
- Leisure battery: 110 amp hr
- Gas: Capacity 2 x 13kg cylinders
- Lighting: Cab: two adjustable spotlights. Overcab: vertical fluorescent on offside. Lounge: four reading lights, two ceiling-mounted downlighters. Kitchen: four downlighters. Washroom: three downlighters. Bedroom: two reading lamps, concealed 'mood' lighting. Garage: two wall-mounted lamps. Awning light, downlighter inside caravan door, auto-illumination in wardrobes
- Sockets: 230V: 4 (lounge, kitchen, vanity unit, foot of rear bed), 12V: 2 (lounge, foot of rear bed)
- Control panel: Mounted above caravan door. Controls water pump, lights, heating/hot water. Digital display shows fresh and waste water levels, vehicle and leisure battery status, internal air temperature, current time, alarm time
- Blinds/curtains: Pull-down blinds/flyscreen to luton windows, blinds to cab windows, pleated blinds/flyscreens to all other caravan windows and rooflights, blind/flyscreen to caravan door window, curtains/nets to lounge and rear bedroom windows
- Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant: Yes

### OPTIONAL EXTRAS

Fitted to test vehicle

- Base: None
  - Conversion: None
- Other options
- Base: Comfort-Matic automatic (auto-changing manual) gearbox (£1400), towbar (£425)
  - Conversion: Living area air-conditioning (£1245)

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